

# The Practice of Learning among Shan Migrant Workers in Chiang Mai

Kyaw Kyaw Min Htut

Critical  
Perspectives  
on Regional  
Integration

07

Thailand  
in Transition

## Series Foreword

The monographs that comprise the Critical Perspectives on Regional Integration series have emerged from dissertations based on original primary field research, and written as a major part of the requirements for the Master of Social Science (Development Studies) program of the Regional Center for Social Science and Sustainable Development (RCSD), in the Faculty of Social Sciences, Chiang Mai University.

As Senior Editorial Adviser, I was engaged by the Center to conduct an overview of the dissertations—dating back to 2001 and now well over 100 pieces of work—and select which of them would best illustrate the quality of graduate student research. This was by no means an easy task, but it was decided to choose primarily those written in the past few years, given that empirical research in social science tends to date rapidly. Another consideration was that the monographs should give expression to the main theme of the series of Critical Perspectives on Regional Integration.

As the selection and editorial work proceeded it was then decided to organize the publications into sub-series focused on different parts of mainland Southeast Asia. The first several volumes focus on Myanmar, covering such subjects as livelihood strategies, changing ethnic identities, borders and boundary-crossing, and the commoditization of culture within the context of ethnic tourism. Following volumes are devoted to Thailand, Lao PDR, Vietnam, and Cambodia.

The series also illustrates the concern to bring together social science and natural science knowledge in order to further the understanding of sustainable development issues. Over some 20 years Chiang Mai University has developed considerable research expertise in such fields as resource management, environmental impact assessment, upland agricultural systems and indigenous knowledge, health, and ethnic and gender relations. Teaching and research in development issues also deploys social science concepts within the development field to address decision-making, policy and practice, and the responses and adaptations of local populations.

This current monograph series also focuses on the processes of social, cultural, economic, political and environmental change among populations and territories undergoing rapid transformations within the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) and the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC).

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Senior Editorial Adviser, Critical Perspectives on Regional Integration Series

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Chiang Mai hosts a large population of immigrant workers from Burma (Myanmar), the majority of them Shan—or Thai Yai—Burma's largest ethnic minority. Some come as refugees from civil war, an oppressive military, and great poverty. Others come for better-paid jobs. The book focuses on the importance of learning in establishing their new life and new social networks in Thailand. Most of them have had only elementary education in Burma, due to limited facilities in Shan State. They have to learn to speak Thai, which comes easily as their Thai Yai dialect is very similar. They also need to learn to read and write, as Thai Yai uses a different script. Many take advantage of the educational facilities available to them in Thailand to study English and other languages or computer science, or to take various vocational training courses. Some aspire to go on to higher education; others hope to put their new-found learning to use back in Burma or by improving their work status in Thailand.

The writer stresses the importance of non-institutional learning, eg practicing Thai with neighbours and at work; learning new skills at work; learning about Thai culture from personal interactions and the media – TV, radio, journals.



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## Chapter 1

# Introduction

### Rationale

In Thailand people usually refer to the Shan as “Tai Yai” (“Big Tai”). Most Shan migrant workers are from Shan State in Burma, which borders the western Thai provinces of Chiang Rai, Mae Hong Son, Chiang Mai and Tak. Not all migrant workers from Shan State are Shan, but they represent the great majority (Amporn, 2008). The Shan are the largest population of migrant workers in Chiang Mai. Due to unbalanced development and uneven power relations in the region, migration has taken place for more than two decades. Starting from 1992, Thailand has been documenting border crossings from neighboring countries - Burma, Cambodia and Laos – which are the main sources of transnational migrant workers, with Burma accounting for the biggest migrant population in the Kingdom.

Migrant workers in Northern Thailand and their way of life are part of the flow of people, ideas and culture crossing the political, social and cultural borders of the host society. Transnational migrant workers bring with them their identities, culture, politics and socioeconomy. In order to understand the various factors making up the individual migrant workers’ lives and their relations to the host society, their life-style practices - their tactics to negotiate their socioeconomy, security and identity in the new society - are significant.

Burmese transborder migration to Thailand was generally conceptualized as due to push factors - the impacts of political conflicts, ethnic insurgency and

socioeconomic hardship in Burma; and pull factors - global capital expansion and investment in Thailand demanding cheap labor resources. But there are other factors too. Ethnically and culturally there are both similarities and differences between the Shan and the Thais. In the Shan migrant workers' transnational life the similarities are helpful, but cultural and ethnic differences create social demarcations, and social boundaries between Shan migrant workers and host communities affect the Shan migrant workers' security, economically and existentially. The purpose of this study is to find out how Shan migrant workers negotiate these differences in order to make their transnational life secure. There can be several tactics available, but the focus of this study is on learning. Shan transmigrants apply learning practices in order to fulfill subjective and objective purposes. For example, migrant workers learn the local Thai language and culture through institutional and informal learning in order to be able to communicate with local Thai people. From this social interaction, they can get involved in the social structure of a specific community where they can access the social capital of the group. When they learn computer or other skills, this can also be seen as an investment in cultural capital through which they can expect to belong to a specific community or class.

## **Transnational migrations into Thailand**

After the military coup in 1962 in Burma, peripheral states, including Shan State, were denied the autonomy they had been promised at independence. Resistance to assimilation from ethnic groups led to civil war and rebellions. Fifty years of warfare resulted in socioeconomic hardship for people in both rural and urban areas. Millions of people have left Burma in search of security and safety due to nearly half a century of conflict, militarization, economic hardship, ethnic uprisings and minority persecution.

In addition to the former migration of merchants and members of resistance forces along the Thai border, large-scale migration to Thailand started after an unsuccessful uprising in 1988. Opposition groups mainly found refuge in the border areas of three Thai provinces: Mae Hong Son, Tak and Ranong. Later on many members of opposition groups found refuge in third countries or other towns in Thailand where they often registered as migrant workers in order to survive. Eight years later, in 1996, similar political migration happened



again in response to a government crackdown. And in 2007 the saffron revolution was followed by yet further migration to Thailand.

Economic sanctions are another factor: they have probably been the greatest cause of widespread poverty, inflation, and unemployment or underemployment. The European Union and the United States imposed sanctions on Burma in 1996. The consequent hardships have led thousands of people from peripheral areas, especially Kachin, Shan and Chin states, to migrate to neighboring countries. The Shan mainly migrated to the nearby Northern provinces of Thailand.

For decades following Burma's independence, Thailand allowed ethnic minority groups opposing the Burmese regime to mass along the border to protect Thailand from an invasion of communism or from nearby countries which covertly supported communism. Throughout these decades minority peoples from Burma including Shan fled into neighboring Thailand or massed along the border areas in territory controlled by resistance groups. These politically related migrants can be seen as seeking temporary refugee status in Thailand. There are approximately 143,000 refugees in Thailand who have escaped political and ethnic persecution in Burma (Falco M, 2003). Even though some political migrants take refuge in refugee camps, large numbers become immigrants who are documented as migrant workers. But the vast majority of Shan in Thailand are economic migrants—those who enter seeking a better life, or sojourners hoping to send remittances home.

Another pulling effect is global capital investment in Thailand and the difference in economic development. In 2015, according to the IMF, Thailand's GDP per capita was US \$ 5,742 – nearly five times as much as Burma's US \$ 1,212. Shan migrants can make three or four times as much in daily wages in Thailand as they can in Burma. Transnational and national investments in Thailand demanded substantial cheap labor resources which had to come from neighboring countries, and Burmese, Lao and Cambodian migrants became the mass labor resource.

### **Shan migrant workers' educational background**

A new Educational Policy was introduced in Burma on 1<sup>st</sup> June 1950. One of the significant changes was that modern textbooks were introduced in

Burmese in all subjects. In 1958, the Ministry of Education announced that the medium of instruction in schools was to be Burmese. The central government's idea was to promote assimilation, and hence Burmese nationalism, through the schools; but there was an inevitable clash with ethnic nationalism. In Burma, 80 percent of the population speaks Burmese which is the official language. But ethnic minority children, including Shan, have their native ethnic language as their mother tongue, which makes for learning difficulties in Burmese language schools. In Shan State there is also the barrier of individual and household culture in the villages. Historically and culturally, Shan people mainly learn in monasteries and through vocational practice on the farm. According to the 2007 report of the Migrant Learning Center in Chiang Mai, many of their Burmese students, including Shan, had never attended state-run schools since the family culture encouraged them to learn practical farming and rice cultivation. Thus, we can assume that the formal educational background of many of the Shan migrant workers only went as far as elementary level.

### **Shan Migrant workers' livelihoods**

Shan Migrant workers cross the Thai-Burma border in several ways, including crossing border gates by day pass, illegally using jungle paths, or, rarely, by air. Mostly they are brought in illegally by brokers, including both Burmese and Thai (Myint Wai et al., 2004). In 1992, the Thai government began allowing illegal migrant workers to seek jobs legally under approval of the Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare. By 1996, about 75 percent of migrant workers in Thailand were Burmese, the rest being Lao or Cambodian (Awatsaya et al., 2004).

Most of the Shan migrant workers are employed as domestic workers or as basic workers in indoor industries. This meets the requirements of the Thai Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare which initially included "domestic workers" in its mandate when registering migrant workers in 1996. About 50% of the workers are employed in fishing, aquaculture, trade, hotels, restaurants, and domestic services. Substantial numbers also work in agriculture and forestry, and manufacturing, earning around 4,000 baht per month (Myint Wai, 2004). Under the updated alien labor policy, types of job will be restricted and visibly identified by different colored identity cards. Migrant workers need

to find an employer to approve the application for an alien labor identity card. For this process, they need to access available information through social networks. In other words, they need to apply social capital.

Migrant workers make enormous contributions to the Thai economy and there is general acknowledgement of the benefits from Shan migrant workers. The consensus among business leaders is that migrants are an asset to Thailand; they contribute stability and reliable productivity to the Thai economy, particularly in export industries. In 1998, following the 1997 economic crisis, there were labor shortages when 81,000 foreign workers were dismissed from employment as a result of government policy, and firms were able to fill only 27,400 of the resultant vacancies with Thai workers (Bryant Yuan Fu Yang, 2009). Even though Shan migrant workers are contributing in working environments which local Thai people consider as “dangerous, dirty, and degrading”, there is nevertheless widespread fear of Shan migrants as a threat by stealing jobs from Thai citizens. Shan migrant workers are also viewed as criminals that destabilize Thai society and transgress Thai laws and norms. The Thai media commonly plays on “themes of chaos, rebels, drug-running warlords, and dangers” within Burma’s borderlands (Prem et al., 2004) and highlights contemporary criminals, even though their activities are insignificant compared with crimes committed by local Thais (Bryant Yuan Fu Yang, 2009).

For coping with risks and accessing information, Shan migrant workers use social networks and learning practices in the community. To be able to communicate effectively in terms of social cohesiveness, migrant workers learn language and dominant cultural practices. They also learn skills in the expectation of better job opportunities. Institutional and informal learning practices become another way of improving their livelihoods.

## **Learning practices in Thailand**

Thai education policy allows people of any nationality access to basic education, but in practice Thai formal schools could not take on responsibility for the education of adult migrant learners (Caouette, 2001).

Migrant workers can access the following types of educational resource in Chiang Mai:

- Vocational training schools
- Informal, non-formal or correspondence schools
- Boarding schools

Vocational training schools provide migrant workers with vocational skills with which they can improve their competencies and expect better paid jobs. The Migrant Learning Center of the Thinking Classroom Foundation is a school where migrant laborers can access basic language, computer and tailoring skills. Correspondence schools normally provide basic academic resources developed in the Thai education system whereby migrant laborers can upgrade their education to secondary level. Even though both documented and undocumented laborers can get access to this educational resource, only the documented laborers' educational achievements will be officially certified in order to get access to higher education. Boarding schools are normally operated by exiled or transnational community-based organizations providing academic preparation courses and knowledge relating to leadership, human rights and political systems. Applicants have to pass a test in order to be accepted for study in such schools.

The above learning landscape covers only the institutional learning places for migrant workers. But migrant workers also learn in the communities where they live and work, where they pick up language and cultural practices and can gain access to information through social networks. Migrant workers also learn skills and dominant cultural practices in the work place where they build cultural and social capital through learning practices. This informal learning in the community is a very important element in the learning landscape for the daily life of migrant workers coping with risk and survival in Thailand.

## Research Questions

Migration is the livelihood strategy of Shan migrant workers who have fled their motherland, due to economic hardship and political conflicts, to find a better life in Thailand. Because of the barriers from migrant labor law and/or because of a lack of education and skills, they work in basic jobs. As well as the phenomena already mentioned, there are issues not only in the political and socioeconomic sphere but also in the socio-cultural sphere which affect the negotiation of identity and engagement in the social activities and practices of Shan migrant workers' daily life.

Tracing back to the starting point of migration, Shan migrant workers need information relating to security along the migration route and information relating to job opportunities in Thailand. They usually access this information through their social networks; in other words, they use their social capital in various ways. Through the social network, migrant workers learn where and how to get this information, and about coping strategies for risks. They also learn how and where to get involved in the specific social networks which will be of most use to them to cope with risks and find information. For job security and belongingness to the host community, migrant workers need communication tools and competency to be able to increase interactive communication, productivity, and quality of work; and to be able to adopt the dominant cultural practices through which they will be able to get involved in specific social networks. Migrant workers have to deal with socio-cultural and socioeconomic issues in daily life; they learn how to cope with these issues and how to acquire these practices. I will argue that learning is the key to adopting the relevant coping strategies which they can use to get involved in social networks.

For the whole research project, the overall ideology is framed in the concept of cultural and social capital construction. Specific research questions are as follows:

- What are the Shan migrant workers' learning landscapes, what and how do they learn?
- How do learning practice and adopted cultural capital function in the interrelations of cultural, socioeconomic and political attributes of Shan migrant workers' daily lives, which are important for maintaining their membership in their respective communities?
- How do learning practices function in the construction of the cultural and socioeconomic class identities of Shan migrant workers?

## Research Objectives

The main purpose of this research was to investigate Shan migrant workers' learning practices as a way of identity construction and of gaining and maintaining membership of their respective communities. Detailed objectives are as follows:



- To identify and analyze the learning landscape of Shan migrant workers in Chiang Mai, including both institutional and informal learning.
- To analyze the function of learning practices as a way of belonging to the respective communities.
- To analyze the function of learning practices as a way of constructing identities.

## Chapter 2

# Literature Review

### Shan historical background

The Shan belong to the ethnic group of Tai who are spread around south western parts of China, Hainan, Vietnam, Thailand, Cambodia, Burma and Assam in north-east India. Scholars believe that Tai groups originally lived in central Asia and migrated along the rivers, including the Mekong, Chao Phraya, Irrawaddy and Brahmaputra. Tai ethnic people kept on the move to practice their wet-rice cultivation culture (Sai Aung Tun, 2005). Members of this group were given different names and had different appearances and costumes in different places. In Burma they are known as Shan.

### *Shan settlement in Burma*

The Mao kingdom (situated along what is now the Sino-Burmese frontier, with a capital near the modern-day border town of Ruili) is the first recorded Tai settlement in the region. Tai groups were believed by many scholars to have been earlier settlers along with the establishment of Nanzhao in the seventh century. Since the Mao area was located in the north-eastern part of Burma adjoining both Nanzhao and the central plains of the Irrawaddy River, the location was geographically strategic for Tai people to migrate into the fertile plains along the rivers of upper Burma.

Tai peoples also spread to the west of Burma into the north of Arakan (now Rakhine) and Assam where they established the satellite kingdom of the

Ahom Shan. They also moved in several directions along the Irrawaddy River, specifically, to the north of Burma along the upstream areas of the river to occupy Hkamti; to the south or downstream of the river to join with other groups and later to establish kingdoms and dynasties in upper Burma.

The area now demarcated as Shan State was also filled with Tai immigrants who founded feudal states including Hsi Paw (Thipaw) and Keng Tung, each with its own feudal ruler. Since the Mao kingdom was not as strong as Nanzhao, it kept peaceful political and cultural ties as a tributary state of Nanzhao. After Nanzhao was overrun by the Mongols, new Tai immigrants from that area arrived to build up the population in Shan State.

Among the many minority ethnic groups residing in the multi-national Union of Burma, the Shan are the largest, occupying different parts of the country, especially the eastern plateau called the Shan State. The Shan have a history and cultural tradition of their own with a developed literature. They are mostly Buddhists and are mainly engaged in agriculture (The Columbia Encyclopedia, 2008). They speak the Shan language, classified as Sino-Tai. It is distantly related to Cantonese and other Chinese dialects, and closely related to Lao and Thai.

Shan State is one of the seven constituted ethnic states and is located in the eastern part of Burma, covering about 60,000 square miles (156,000 sq. km.) - approximately 23 percent of the country's area - and hosting an estimated population of three to four millions (Ekeh, 2007). It contains 52 townships and 1,936 wards and village tracts. Most of the Shan reside in Shan State but they are also widely spread across the country, from the central plains to the peripheral mountainous areas. They have had a long relationship with other ethnic peoples, especially the branch of Tibeto-Sino language-speaking people known as Bamar or Burman.

Wherever the Tai people migrated they took with them the Baan and Mong ("Muang" in Thai) system. Baan is village and Mong is a town, city or state. Individual families will group together to form a Baan or village. Many Baans over a wide area of territory will group together to become a Mong. Over the Shan Plateau there are many Baans, Mong and Keng forming the Shan States or Shan State (Sai Aung Tun, 2005).